

Memorial Art Gallery commissions Javier Téllez, Isaac Julien and Dara Birnbaum as part of a new media art series “Reflections on Place,” inspired by the City of Rochester

New commissions will be presented individually beginning in 2018



Javier Téllez
Photo courtesy of the artist



Isaac Julien
Photo Thierry Bal



Dara Birnbaum
Courtesy Dara Birnbaum and
Marian Goodman Gallery

Memorial Art Gallery (MAG) of the University of Rochester announces today a series of media art commissions inspired by the City of Rochester, New York. “Reflections on Place” will feature the work of three international artists: Javier Téllez (Venezuela, b. 1969), Isaac Julien (U.K., b. 1960) and Dara Birnbaum, (U.S., b. 1946). These works will be individually presented from April 8, 2018, and will enter MAG’s permanent collection at the end of the exhibitions.

John G. Hanhardt, MAG’s consulting senior curator of media arts, invited Téllez, Julien and Birnbaum to create artworks inspired by unique resources found in Rochester. Home to Frederick Douglass, Susan B. Anthony and George Eastman, founder of Kodak, the City played a crucial part in the history of the Underground Railroad, the women’s suffrage movement, and the transformation of photography into a vernacular medium. Téllez, Julien and Birnbaum will create artworks of international relevance informed by current events and the social, cultural and political history of Rochester.

Jonathan P. Binstock, director of MAG, says, “We are thrilled to have three leaders in media arts create new commissions for MAG as part of “Reflections on Place.” Rochester was one of America’s first boomtowns, the Silicon Valley of its time, and a source of globally influential ideas of social justice and political activism. The City will provide inspiration for the artists and a distinctive historic and urban lens for their projects. We look forward to bringing these works to audiences in Rochester and around the world.”

Shooting on large-format film, artist **Javier Téllez** will create a single-channel installation that focuses on history, photography and cinema. Opening April 8, 2018, his film will explore the tension between the still photo and the

moving image, contrasting the artificiality of Kodak's advertisements with the racial and social inequality of the 1960s. Téllez is internationally recognized for his collaborations with mental health patients, who help write and act in his film works. He will bring this approach to Rochester and use Eastman Kodak's factory and corporate headquarters as the main locations for a project that addresses crucial questions of film as a medium and researches different models of spectatorship.

Isaac Julien's *Rochester Pictures* will be freely inspired by the lives of two of the most iconic residents of Rochester: the visionary African American abolitionist Frederick Douglass, a freed slave who became the most photographed man of his generation, and his friend, anti-slavery and women's rights activist Susan B. Anthony. Working with a series of vignettes and tableaux, such as the reconstruction of the photographic studio and gallery of James Presley Ball, Julien will explore key aspects of their activities in Rochester, as well as Douglass' speaking tours of England in 1845 and 1859. Through extensive use of Frederick Douglass' "timely words," intertwined with special visual effects, as well as music and poetry from that time, Julien will create a multiple screen film installation, to be presented in early 2019. It will be shot in original Kodak 35mm black-and-white and color film stock.

Dara Birnbaum's commission will be a multichannel visual and sound installation. Key to the project is research Birnbaum is conducting on the immediate after-effects of the 1964 Rochester race riots, in particular upon the African American community and also the ever-widening ripples through African American culture. The project starts with the 1965 song *Grinnin' In Your Face* by Delta blues musician Son House, who lived in Rochester from 1943 until his death in 1988, and then links to *Soul Train*, whose inspiration also first emerged in 1965 and then progressed, in 1971, with the creation of the first African American owned and nationally syndicated television program, by the same name. A characteristic aspect of her work, Birnbaum will emphasize both image and sound equally as she examines the newly forged representation of youth culture present in the African American community through television media in the 1970s. This work is simultaneously meant to be an homage to the emergence of African American culture on American television.

John G. Hanhardt says, "It's exciting to bring these extraordinary artists to Rochester. Their response to the city and its history is inspiring new work that speaks to our world today."

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Notes to Editors

About MAG's Media Arts Watch Initiative

The moving image in all its forms holds center stage in today's art world—from single-channel video works projected on a screen to immersive multimedia installations. The Memorial Art Gallery is undertaking a major new media arts initiative to bring these exciting contemporary art practices into its collection, exhibition and education programs. Launched in Fall 2016, the initiative includes the acquisition and exhibition of approximately 30 works of video art over a period of three years in a dedicated media arts gallery. Simultaneously, MAG is commissioning three world-class contemporary artists to create moving image installations reflecting the complex social, cultural and political history of Rochester.

About Javier Téllez

Javier Téllez (b. 1969 Venezuela; lives and works in New York City) uses an approach that combines a sophisticated visual language drawn from the history of world cinema and performances involving members of the local community. An example of this aesthetic strategy is *Oedipus Marshall* (2006), which offers a retelling of the classical Greek myth and the legend of the founding of the American West. *Oedipus Marshall* tells its story through performances drawing on local performers and visualized through a mix of cinematic genres and styles. It demonstrates Téllez's unique approach to working on location and in the community. Téllez views local history as an archive to explore, and the lives and experiences of the people in the community as a rich resource to engage in the narratives he creates for his art. Another example is his installation *Letter on the Blind for the Use of Those Who See*, which premiered in 2007 at the Whitney Museum of American Art Biennial exhibition. It was a particularly celebrated work from that exhibition. The work features six blind men who are invited to touch a different part of an elephant and to describe what they feel in relation to the overall constitution of the animal. The piece was inspired by the French Enlightenment thinker Denis Diderot's "Letter on the Blind: For the Use of Those Who See" (1749). Téllez's use of New York City as a site for the creation of the work, of local people drawn from the City for the actors, and of a direct style of filming created a compelling and memorable artwork.

About Isaac Julien

Isaac Julien, CBE (b. 1960 London; lives and works in London) is as acclaimed for his fluent, arresting films as for his vibrant and inventive gallery installations. One objective of his work is to break down the barriers that exist between different artistic disciplines, drawing from and commenting on film, dance, photography, music, theater, painting and sculpture, and uniting them to construct a powerfully visual narrative. Julien came to prominence in the film world with his 1989 drama-documentary *Looking for Langston*, gaining a cult following with this poetic exploration of author Langston Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance. During the past two decades he has made work largely, though not exclusively, for galleries and museums, using multi-screen installations to express fractured narratives exploring memory and desire.

Julien's major film installations include the seven-screen *PLAYTIME*, 2014, which explores the dramatic and nuanced subject of financial capital. Julien's critically acclaimed nine-screen film installation *Ten Thousand Waves*, 2010, explores China's ancient past and rapidly transforming present through a series of interlocking narratives. Earlier audio-visual installations include *Baltimore*, 2003, which, in part through the stylizations of black action movies from the 1970s, looks at the histories, divisions and intersections of black and white cultures, and his trilogy comprising *True North*, 2004, *Fantôme Afrique*, 2005, and *Western Union: Small Boats*, 2007, all of which deal with themes of voyaging and cultural displacement on both a local and global scale.

About Dara Birnbaum

Dara Birnbaum (b. 1946, New York City; lives and works in New York City) received her architecture degree from



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Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, being the only woman to graduate in her class. In the early 1970s she practiced architecture and urban planning with the highly recognized firm of Lawrence Halprin & Associates, San Francisco. Birnbaum's legendary and now canonical *Technology/ Transformation: Wonder Woman* from 1978–79 is, according to the non-profit media arts organization Electronic Arts Intermix, “an incendiary deconstruction of the ideology embedded in television form and pop cultural iconography.” Birnbaum has, for 40 years, exhibited internationally. Currently her work is being exhibited in the group show *Delirious: Art at the Limits of Reason, 1950–1980* at the Met Breuer, NYC. She was also featured in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's *The Pictures Generation, 1974–1989*. Birnbaum's work was exhibited in Documenta 7, 8 and 9, a vast number of Venice Biennales, and many other prominent international exhibitions. Her work is in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art and Whitney Museum of American Art in New York; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Reina Sofia, Madrid; S.M.A.K., Ghent, and Moderna Museet, Stockholm, among numerous other international institutions. Among the many awards and recognitions received by Birnbaum are: The Maya Deren Award, presented by the American Film Institute; a certificate of recognition for service in the field presented by Derek Bok, former President of Harvard University, and the creation of the “Birnbaum Award,” named in her honor, as established in 2016 by Carnegie Mellon University.

About John G. Hanhardt

John G. Hanhardt is MAG's consulting senior curator of media arts. Hanhardt began his museum career in the department of film and video at The Museum of Modern Art in New York City, and from there went to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis to establish its film program and film study collection. From 1974 to 1996 he was curator and head of the film and video department at the Whitney Museum of American Art. He was the senior curator of film and media arts at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum from 1996 to 2006. He joined the Smithsonian American Art Museum's staff in 2006, and was a consulting senior curator of film and media arts there until 2016.

As a native of Rochester and University of Rochester alum, Hanhardt was inspired by photography, film and media arts during frequent visits to the George Eastman Museum and by the programming of the Visual Studies Workshop. Among numerous publications, Hanhardt recently wrote a monograph on Bill Viola, published by Thames and Hudson (2016).

About Jonathan P. Binstock, Mary W. and Donald R. Clark Director

Jonathan P. Binstock, Ph.D., is Mary W. and Donald R. Clark Director of the Memorial Art Gallery, University of Rochester. He was formerly Senior Vice President for Modern and Contemporary Art in the Art Advisory & Finance group of Citi Private Bank. At Citi he worked with clients and their families in the US and abroad to build personal art collections, and assessed the quality and value of artworks in the Bank's art lending program. He joined Citi after more than a decade of curatorial work in museums. An expert in art of the post-WWII era, prior to Citi he was Curator of Contemporary Art at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, and Assistant Curator at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia.

Dr. Binstock is the author and/or curator of, among other books and exhibitions, *Meleko Mokgosi: Pax Kaffraria*, published by the Hammer Museum, UCLA (2014); *Dan Steinhilber: Marlin Underground* (2012); *Sam Gilliam: A Retrospective* (2005); *Atomic Time: Pure Science and Seduction* (2003), which featured art by Jim Sanborn; the 47th (2002) and 48th (2005) Corcoran Biennials; *Andy Warhol: Social Observer* (2000), and two exhibitions devoted to the late and influential artist Jeremy Blake (2000 and 2007). His latest curatorial project is *The Music of Color. Sam Gilliam, 1967–73*, a major exhibition scheduled to open at the Kunstmuseum Basel in June 2018, simultaneously with the Art Basel art fair. He is the co-curator of this project with Josef Helfenstein, director of the Kunstmuseum Basel.



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